

Israel Aggression Approved

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BY ARTHUR GILBERT

Evangelist Billy Graham says Zionist conquest of Arab lands is fulfillment of Bible prophecy.

BILLY GRAHAM had just returned from his crusade in Kansas City. His calendar included, in rapid succession, meetings with evangelical leaders, a visit to former President Dwight Eisenhower at his home in Gettysburg, and a new crusade in Japan. Sandwiched between these engagements was one more—interview: Rabbi Arthur Gilbert.

I had met the noted evangelist in Berlin late last year when, representing the Anti-Defamation League, I had attended the World Congress on Evangelism. I was the only Jew there.

Disturbed by the attitude toward Jews of some evangelicals, and by the fact that while dialogue between American Jews and American Christians of most denominations was increasing it remained almost non-existent between Jews and evangelicals, Billy invited me to his home in Montreat, North Carolina. He said he wanted to help.

"Visit my home, spend time with me in conversation," he said in Berlin. "Let us go into the problem in greater depth."

The "problem" was spelled out in *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism*, the first book in the University of Cali-

fornia research series conducted under an ADL grant. The sociological study documented that fundamentalist Protestants, to a larger degree than other Christians, believe that Jews as a people are guilty of the crucifixion, have therefore suffered as a punishment from God, and will never be forgiven until they accept Jesus. The study revealed that while considerable numbers of evangelicals are free of prejudice in their daily lives, far too many hold a stereotypic conception of the modern Jew of such a nature as to justify anti-Semitism. For the most part they believe and preach that the Jew is lost—some even going so far as to view Jews as pagans who must be converted to Christianity in order to be "saved."

Indeed, these sentiments were expressed by some of the 1200 evangelical clergymen brought together from around the world at the convocation in Berlin. "Without Christ," one delegate asserted, "Jews are lost." Another, an Arab Christian, said he believed Jews were gathered in Israel so that with one blow they might be destroyed in a conflagration prototypic of the battle of Gog and Magog.

But Billy himself had a far different view which he dramatically expressed in his opening address.

"...Of the Jewish people we ask forgiveness," he cried out. "We must remember that our Savior was born of a Jewish mother and it is to this people that we owe our Bible."

Now I was in Montreat to continue the conversations begun with Billy Graham in Berlin. In an evening and a day at his home we dined together, read Scriptures together, and with his wife, Ruth, spoke of many things.

The world-famous evangelist said he thought the lack of dialogue between Jews and evangelicals might stem from the latter's insistence on proselytizing and the Jewish aversion to it. I agreed and recounted incidents when evangelical Protestants had taken unfair advantage of the dialogue. Billy said that as he grew in sensitivity his own method of handling Jews attending his crusades had changed. When Jews step forward at his crusades, he makes no special missionary appeal for their conversion. He urges that they study Hebrew Scripture, certain, he said, that they will find the Messiah in the words of the Old Testament.

Our conversation moved to the crisis in the Middle East. Acknowledging the sympathetic response of many individual Christians toward Israel's plight, I spoke of widespread Jewish dissatisfaction with the lack of official Christian response to the Arab threat of genocide. I reminded Billy that I had elicited an official statement from him and had received no answer. He said he was on a crusade in Canada at the time and had delayed his reaction because of the pleas of evangelical Christians in Arab countries who feared reprisals from their host governments. He pointed out, however, that during an hour-long interview on Canadian TV, he had articulated his "total and whole sympathy with Israel." In addition, he had been in touch privately with American political figures

urging support for Israel's right to survival.

"The Jews are God's chosen people," he declared. "We cannot place ourselves in opposition to Israel without detriment to ourselves."

Billy said that despite his caution in offending Arab sensibilities, his strong pro-Jewish views were so well known that he has been barred from the United Arab Republic since 1961.

I told him that his sentiments were encouraging but that Jews are not certain how enthusiastically to accept Christian fundamentalist support offered on the basis of a literalist reading of prophecy in Scripture. In Jewish experience, such Christian affirmations of the "chosen" concept and the gathering of the exiles as fulfillment of prophecy had been accompanied frequently by warnings that Israel would be destroyed in a catastrophic battle, seen by some evangelists as a confrontation between America and the Soviet Union or China. Some had given this interpretation with such enthusiasm that it appeared almost to be a wish that the catastrophe would occur soon. In their view the battle would usher in the age of the Messiah. This kind of thinking, I said, lends itself to passivity in the face of harsh political realities. The will to prevent international chaos and disorder is repressed as the fundamentalist, in smug, self-righteousness, sits out the trouble. Therefore, what appeared to be support of Israel might, in fact, be a disguised expression of hostility. I noted, too, that fundamentalist support for the gathering of Jews in Israel was frequently accompanied with an appeal for intensified missionary work and an anticipation of mass conversion. Thus Jews were understandably leery that Israel was not being supported for her own integrity or judged on her own merits, but was being evaluated instead in the context of a Christian timetable of events.

Billy was taken aback. He had not realized how important it was to spell out fully the implications of his words. He elaborated. He agreed that at end-time, there would be a conflagration—of what duration, he could not predict—in the Mid-East, and particularly at Armageddon. But this was an *end-time* prediction, he said. It was not a *now-time* exhortation. Furthermore, according to his reading of Scripture, Jews would be preserved, not destroyed.

His blue eyes sparkling, Billy offered his belief that the fulfillment of prophetic utterances regarding the ingathering of Jews is now being fulfilled. "*The land is important,*" he said. "*It is a gift of God to the Jews. Redemption itself is mysteriously interconnected with that land.*" The end-time battle, he repeated, will see Jews restored in greater security to their home and then "the nations of the world will be judged on the basis of their treatment of the Jews."

Billy concluded: "I support the significance of Israel for the Jew—even apart from the missionaries' hopes for Jewish conversion. Israel has a meaning for Jews apart from any New Testament hopes. It is a promised condition of their existence, revealed by God in Hebrew Scripture, that Jews be connected to this land. It is there that they must struggle to live a national existence that will hopefully reflect the glory of God and serve as a sign to man that the God Abraham is a God faithful to His promises. He lives."

Christian guilt for past sins committed against the Jewish people played a role in Billy Graham's sympathetic attitude. He was truly anguished by Christian shortcoming and believed it most important, therefore for Christians at this point in history to refrain from manipulating or misusing Jews. "Jews have a right to be respected for what they are—a people who live still by the light of God in the Old Testament," Billy declared.

Discussing Christian responsibility to

law and social reform, he said both methods of change were unreliable without individual regeneration. Unlike some fundamentalist opponents of Christian social action, Billy insisted that Christians, individually and through their corporate structures, must enter the social arena and seek to improve society. In recent years, through his own crusades and public testimony, he has tried to set an example. Negroes are members of his team. He will not lead a crusade or meeting unless it is integrated. I found Billy conversant on the most recent events of racial conflict. He expressed dismay at the anti-Semitic course taken by some Black Power extremists and he questioned me closely on my own views.

"Anti-Semitism, no matter what its origins, no matter where it is found, is a blatant denial of God in the Jew. It must be repudiated," Billy said. "We must attack any shred of anti-Semitic discrimination. We must purge ourselves completely of this foul blemish from a former period of apostasy."

We concluded our discussion on the Middle East by dealing with concrete political problems. While Billy is a great admirer of King Hussein and has many friends in Jordan, he is convinced that Jerusalem will be re-united as a Jewish city. He is certain that Jews will provide Christians and Muslims free access to all holy places.

Billy was convinced that all of the territory from the Nile to the Euphrates was promised to the Jews by God through the prophets. He feels that recent Israeli acquisition of parts of this territory may be a fulfillment of some of these prophecies. He said that if he were an Israeli official he would not yield to pressures that could jeopardize Israel's physical security. Israel was right to seek negotiations with the Arabs, he said, adding that he hopes Israel will be just—even magnanimous—in her relations toward Arabs, particularly the Arabs in her midst.

Billy and I discussed his views on the Jewish role in the crucifixion.

"The Romans killed Christ," Billy declared. "All of the people of that day had a part in the tragedy. It was man's sin as man that was responsible, not the sin of man as Jew or as Gentile. Even God played a role in the drama, for it was God's will that Jesus be sacrificed, as a reconciling atonement for man with God."

On the teaching of Paul in the New Testament, Billy exclaimed, "God forbid: The Jews are not a people rejected of God." Then he added, "Had all the Jews then accepted Jesus, the Kingdom of God would have been ushered in forthwith. It worked out to our benefit as Gentiles, however, that we were given the opportunity, through Jewish obstinacy, to come to know God. We Christians must acknowledge that through our faith in Christ, we are grafted on to the Jewish people and we share with them the blessings of God.

"It is not that we displace the Jews, or that Jews are rejected or accursed. By God's foreknowledge, not all Jews accepted Jesus so that Gentiles might come to share *with* the Jews God's promises for the future. The Jews with whom we are now engrafted are not only those Jews who accept Jesus as the promised Messiah, but also those Jews who still await the Messiah's first coming.

"It is wrong to presume that the sufferings of the Jews are a consequence alone of their denial of Jesus. Certainly it is Biblical to suggest that man suffers punishment as a consequence of sinfulness, but there is also a suffering that is a martyrdom. Christians have also suffered in history. Are we to explain

all suffering as punishment? Certainly not.

"Furthermore, we must confess that Christians sinned against Jews in the name of Christianity. Not God, but men who failed to claim of God in their hearts perpetrated every terrible bloody thing. We must repudiate that past not defend it, nor even explain it away.

"All men are in need of God's forgiveness. Jews are under no special guilt and, in fact, the Church stands in the same need of forgiveness.

"It is my conviction," continued Billy Graham, "that Christ is the way to God's forgiving love, but it ill behooves me to judge Jews as a people lost to salvation. God, in His own time and way, will judge all men by the light according to which they live. We must distinguish he who lives by no revelation from one who knows that God is revealed in nature, in the world, and in history. The believing Jew's whole approach to life is testimony to his faithfulness to the God of his fathers. Christians must respect such devotedness to God."

Billy and I talked of still other subjects, the plight of Jews behind the Iron Curtain, the relatedness of post-Biblical rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament, distorted Christian notions of the Pharisees, the moral issues involved in the Vietnam war, the dialogue between Jews and Christians. He is a brilliant man, with a perceptive mind, and most important, a heart that cares deeply about people.

I left Montreat satisfied that our dialogue would continue, encouraged that evangelicals are no longer inaccessible. I left Montreat respectful of Christianity—and strengthened in my Judaism.

"I can remember when a liberal was generous with his own money."

—Will Rogers